



## WHEN THE SELF IS HIDDEN BEHIND ACTIVITY

Antonietta Potente, op<sup>1</sup>

«The quality of mercy is not strained. It drops as a gentle rain from heaven on the place beneath»...<sup>2</sup>.

If this is what mercy is like, then how much more so should be the ways in which we relate to reality by means of our words and gestures, our small interventions in situations and in the lives of others.... And not only this, but also by means of our thoughts, our interpretation of history, our judgments....

What does this have to do with the title of my talk? you might ask.

In my opinion, a lot, because nothing in life is true, loyal and just if, as Shakespeare infers, it is in some way forced, perhaps with cultural or religious overtones.

Even more: how is the self possible if it does not have a kind of mercy toward itself—a mercy that does not bring pressure to bear on one’s own or another’s life but that is a way of relating that takes place *on the place beneath* (on the lower levels of the self).

Therefore, nothing obvious for the self, but also nothing that involves a “doing” that in some way remains superficial—something attractive to a self that would like to walk on water without ever sinking into it, getting wet, being soaked by it, feeling the wetness, as happened to Peter when he tried to imitate his Master (Mt. 14:22-36). Peter wanted to reach Jesus, thinking that this meant simply imitating him. Instead, the Master met him only after he had dramatically “drowned.”

Peter needed to drown, to remain in that indefinite space of water—an element of profundity and the first element of human life. In the maternal womb we are immersed in water and we are water, and the self needs this indefinite, open and vast space every moment of its existence.

It is with this premise that I will try to penetrate the proposed theme.

### THE SELF AND ACTIVITY (*To Be and To Do*)

These two aspects of life are tightly linked. Both require an absence of hurry—the first because it must constantly confront the depths of itself and the latter because it cannot be a chain of meaningless gestures or words, or of hasty and superficial encounters with life, or simply the invasion of another’s area of responsibility.

---

<sup>1</sup> Nata in Liguria, **Antonietta Potente** fa parte dell’Unione Suore Domenicane San Tommaso d’Aquino. Dopo aver conseguito il dottorato in Teologia Morale, ha insegnato a Roma e Firenze. Ha vissuto in Bolivia, dove ha insegnato all’Università di Santa Cruz e di Cochabamba, ha condiviso la sua vita con una famiglia di etnia Aymara e ha appoggiato processi di sviluppo e autodeterminazione. Per quattro anni ha fatto parte della commissione teologica della CLAR (Conferenza Latinoamericana religiosi/e). Attualmente risiede a Torino e continua a esercitare la sua docenza in differenti centri di studio. È autrice di numerosi libri e articoli. Con le Paoline, in Italia ha pubblicato *È vita ed è religiosa. Una vita religiosa per tutti* (Milano 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 4, Scene 1, vv. 182-184.

For example, as Francis of Assisi said: *let God be God*. But I would also say: let every creature—both human and non-human—respond with its own “yes” to the existential pleas that life presents to us here and there. The prophet Baruch writes: «The stars shine joyfully at their posts. When [God] calls them they answer, ‘Here we are.’ They shine to delight their Creator» (Bar. 3:34-35).

This is even more true of the human being, who is called to find his/her own place and responses [in the world].

So the chemistry between the “self” and “doing” is not as simple as we might think. At times one hides not only behind but inside the other; one cloaks the other. The self identifies with doing and becomes confused with it, while doing identifies completely with the self.

It is not easy to notice this unless something has already happened; unless the self is suffering and does not know how to live in thirsty solitude, and unless doing is not detached from the self.

What does all this mean?

In more immediate words, it happens that, for many of us, the self seems to be our only point of reference and everything moves around it.

But perhaps there is a method that can overcome every chronology and hasten this genuine and truly free life, namely: *to come out of oneself*. Contemplation is one of the methods for achieving this.

As Thomas Aquinas says, contemplation is the simple and affectionate gaze of truth, but this doesn’t take place right away. So what are the other paths?

## **FROM THE SELF TO OUTSIDE THE SELF**

Among the many syntheses that might help us discover what has progressively linked these two elements, I will present one: to be “outside the self.” I draw this image from many classical treatises concerning the mystical experience or from the reports of those who were witnesses to the profound experiences of other men and women, for example: St. Teresa of Avila’s *vivo sin vivir en mí*.

But what does this mean?

Actually, the statement is not entirely positive. If we consider this synthesis a little at a time (savoring it in “sips”), the self appears kaleidoscopically in its multiple positions: inside and out, wherever it is, it obeys this great Mystery, which requires one to be “in” and “out” contemporaneously.

Yet it is precisely the intriguing “self” that stands in the midst of this vortex, which consists of both the mystical dimension and, at the same time, day-to-day communal and social realities.

It is the “self” that becomes a witness to its own experience and can say where it is in history and, going beyond every moralistic and narrow imagination, learns to inhabit spaces in another way. And here we can add two more valuable clues: space and habitation—the self’s location and its way of inhabiting that location.

Inhabited space, then, and how to dwell in what—in the mystical experience—drives the self, opening it and inducing it to fall in love with something outside itself.

To explain myself better, I will go back to Christian tradition, not because it is the only valid one, but because it is one of the most eloquent traditions when it comes to evoking the image of the self as setting out on a journey. In fact the Judeo-Christian tradition is, both historically and existentially, the one that most insistently invites a person to come out of him/herself, and therefore it is one of the experiences in which the mystical act is dedicated to “otherness” or, as we said, to going “outside the self” without losing one’s identity.

This is a genuine concern for the human being who, for various reasons, is always tempted to fall into and remain in the labyrinth of the “very solid self” (*“the massif of self”*) to use an expression of Sartre, heavy and at the same time a tight alley in which everything revolves around the transversal axis of its own center, making the rest of reality alien and annoying every time these things are not at its disposal.

On the other hand, this is not something new: the same terminology, more classical and within the language of mystical phenomenology, speaks about *ecstasy*. The term comes from the Greek and means just that: *ex-stasis*—“to be out [of].” It is a psychological state of suspension or truce and mystical elevation of the mind—an expression of the self—which is sometimes perceived as an “out of body” experience. In this context, we speak of identification with the “otherness” outside the self; a meeting of one’s soul with his/her surroundings.

All this is to say that one cannot run away from the self, which is primarily called *to be*, but also that one cannot run away from “doing,” which is the “voice” of being, that is to say, the very expression of being.

A person who tries to appear different in his/her doing, without fidelity to “being,” will sooner or later reveal this inconsistency of life. In other words: this “doing” that is identified with relations outside our real daily life, this “doing” that could seem to be personal generosity and availability to others, will sooner or later reveal its weaknesses. And this might take place in the most normal circumstances of a person’s life: the end of youth; the inability to work as one once did; the need to give way to the younger generations and to other ideas; illness or the first signs that our health is weakening....

At times, perhaps this immaturity of the ego—because that is what it is—will be revealed even before this, that is to say, while we are still young or relatively young and at the height of our creativity in our work or mission and, coincidentally, in our relationships with others. It is almost always manifested as a desire for recognition, as a certain need to “command” those we meet or those who live with us, or as a distinct impatience with those who contradict us or whom we feel are the cause of our problems.

In the oldest spiritual and wisdom traditions, this way of “doing” is almost always expressed through grumbling, which first of all takes place within oneself. It is a real and true grumbling that goes round and round inside of us, making us dissatisfied, restless and discontented. At times we express these feelings to others and develop a perpetual attitude of complaining, discontent, and self-pity.

At this point, “doing” appears to be a cover-up and an outlet, which in turn becomes the heroic lament of having “too much to do.”

## **SO WHICH PATH SHOULD WE FOLLOW?**

The paths are certainly many, but I would like to focus on a proposal that springs from Gospel wisdom, namely, Luke 17:10, which reads: «So when you have done all you have been told to do, say: We are useless servants: we have done no more than our duty»

This is a strange text, at least with regard to its placement. It is a statement in which doing seems to be something taken for granted; the self cannot hide behind it because it could disappear from one moment to the next. Indeed, it almost seems as if doing is a space of slavery (in fact, the translation softens the text by using the word “*servants*” while the Greek reads more bluntly: “unnecessary slaves”). Existentially, “doing” seems to hold second place—it is not indispensable for fullness of life and being.

Meanwhile, since what we do is never ours but a creature’s primordial gesture of caring, we have the “here I am” so dear to Scripture: «The Lord God has given me a well-trained tongue, that I might know how to give a word of comfort to the weary. Morning by morning he makes my ear alert to listen like a disciple» (Is. 50:4).

To do things in a liberating and loving way means to share something with others. But in order for this to happen, the self must adopt the attitude of a disciple—a person who «walks humbly with God» (Mi. 6:8): not behind him or ahead of him, but in step with him.

Doing is like a door one passes through to reach another person: it is not a place in which the self freely bares itself to the world. But if the self acts “nakedly,” it must in some way be aware that its action springs from a great desire for love, from amazement, from a profound yearning to understand others and discover with them the infinite mystery of life.

In doing we must be beggars with regard to truth and light, not despotic persons who think they can do everything on their own because they are convinced that they possess the truth or hold a privileged position, or because they think they have to “remake” everyone else in their own image and likeness.

So let us ask ourselves why it is so hard for us to live without a pre-fixed agenda, without a pre-established schedule that even regulates our sleep. Because we have downsized our communities and businesses? In our documents, when we are speaking about ourselves, why do we speak about a “personnel shortage”?

Isn't it because we have become accustomed to hiding behind our activities and behind the structure itself, using them to comfort—or even worse, recompense—ourselves?

Because the “places” [we inhabit] are closed, because they belong to us alone and we are not able to share them, to fill them with the dreams of others, to fill them with the thirst and searching of others?

I think it is very important for you, all together, to rethink your spaces because this is a time in which the world greatly needs wisdom—not propaganda, but wisdom. It is a time in which many people—especially women—would love to meet so as to reflect, read and study together.

When our place of “doing” undergoes a transformation, then the self also changes, but that self must be so sure of God's dream that it can in some way surrender itself to him happily, even in times of solitude and silence.

In the Scriptures, every deep experience is followed by a feeling of quiet/rest—not the type of “rest” associated with secular vacations, but rather a profound quiet/rest that consists of stillness, silence and attentive listening to the primordial Word.

You will say that this is too poetic but I tell you that I, as a woman, cannot say otherwise. If you fill your spaces with others, not with “doing,” then you will dwell there with love, joy and respect, as if those spaces were not your own. And you would spend the rest of your time yearning to listen and search. Liberate yourselves and history; do not be taken in by appearances and by the power of false masters and idols.

I would like to conclude with an anecdote recounted by Carl Gustav Jung on his visit to India. He said that while he was there he wanted to see as many places as possible so as to better understand the country. However he did not want to meet any “holy men” and this is why:

“I would have considered myself a ‘thief’ if I had appropriated the truths of those holy people, making them my own. Their wisdom belongs to them; only what comes forth from me belongs to me. As a European, I can't borrow anything from the East. Instead, I have to shape my life myself, according to the promptings within me or what nature has given me. [...] Nature, the soul, life: to me, these things seem to be almost a manifestation of the divine. what more could I want?” (*Eastern Wisdom*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin 2012, pp. 2-3).

So the self must learn to shape itself on its own; it cannot be forced to “do.”